



# Turkey's Role in Afghanistan and Afghan Stabilization

Karen Kaya

**O**N 23 MAY 2012, during a visit to Islamabad, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “Turkey will stay in Afghanistan even after all the other forces have left, and will leave only when our Afghan brothers and sisters tell us, “Thank you, now you can go home.”<sup>1</sup> Turkish President Abdullah Gül echoed this view during the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago, reiterating that Turkey’s commitment to Afghanistan was for the long-term.

These comments, which reflect a special relationship between Turkey and Afghanistan, are more than just rhetorical. Turkey has a strong religious, historical, and cultural relationship with Afghanistan. Afghanistan established diplomatic relations with Turkey shortly after it gained independence in 1919 and was the second country to recognize the Republic of Turkey. The two countries have signed numerous friendship and cooperation agreements since 1921. These warm relations that date back to the founding of both countries have continued until the present. Today, Turkey views its presence in Afghanistan not only as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, but also as a “brotherhood duty” to help the Afghan people restore peace. To be sure, Turkey’s views towards Afghanistan are also based on its own strategic interests: as long as Afghanistan is unstable, the whole region will be unstable, posing a security threat to Turkey. When Afghanistan becomes a secure and stable country, this will introduce wider stability in the region, bringing new economic benefits for the region in general and for Turkey in particular.<sup>2</sup>

The shared Islamic religion and cultural ties have made it easier for Turkey to play an active role in Afghanistan, although it refuses to participate in combat operations. Instead, Turkish troops are only involved in ensuring security in their area of responsibility, providing logistical assistance to other international forces, training Afghan security personnel and contributing to capacity development.

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PHOTO: Afghan National Army soldiers march toward their Turkish instructors unseen at a military training base in Egirdir in western Turkey, 18 December 2009. (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici, File)

This would not be possible without the military missions of the other ISAF forces, particularly the large numbers of U.S. forces. Nevertheless, the Turkish forces' noncombatant role still gives them an advantage. In a January 2012 interview with the NATO channel, Kabul Provincial Governor Dr. Zabibullah Mojadid said, "Contrary to some other international forces here, the Turks don't march through our streets with their guns and their caravans, ready to fire. When you see other forces with their hands on their triggers, people are very intimidated. Afghans don't look at the Turkish forces as foreign forces here, they somehow view them as their own."<sup>3</sup>

### **"We Are All Muslims"**

In their book *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*, Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser note that all the peacekeeping operations that have taken place after the Cold War have been in Muslim countries or in countries in which Muslim interests are directly involved, thus increasing the need to have Muslim peacekeepers. As such, they identify Turkey (as well as Egypt and Pakistan) as one of the countries most likely to succeed as leaders of these missions.<sup>4</sup> The common Islamic faith is a significant factor in Turkey's success in winning the hearts and minds of the public. Saleha Fareed, an Afghan orphanage manager, said in the aforementioned NATO interview, "Why are the Turks happy with the Afghans and Afghans happy with the Turks? Everyone knows it's because we are all Muslims and much of our culture and traditions are similar."<sup>5</sup>

### **Noncombat Role and Civilian Provincial Reconstruction Teams**

In 2001 Turkey took part in the International Security Assistance Force with 300 troops on the condition that it would not deploy its troops for explicit counterinsurgency or counterterrorist operations. It assumed the role of ISAF commander twice: first from June 2002-February 2003 (ISAF II); and second from February 2005-August 2005 (ISAF-VII). During the first period Turkey, which initially had only 276 personnel, increased its troop number to 1300. During the ISAF-VII

term, Turkey commanded 8,000 personnel from 30 countries, including 1,450 Turkish personnel. During this period it also operated the Kabul International Airport. In addition, the Turkish Armed Forces took over the Kabul Regional Command (the Regional Command Capital) on 1 November 2009, and their mission has been extended by one-year periods since then. Currently, Turkey is set to continue in this role until 1 November 2013.<sup>6</sup> According to the website of the International Security Assistance Force, Turkey has 1,101 troops in Afghanistan as of June 2013, placing it 8th among the 50 ISAF nations.

Perhaps more important than its military contributions is Turkey's social and cultural contributions. Turks run the Wardak and Jawzjan Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), the only PRTs run by civilian diplomats. They decided on this concept over a military-led PRT because they thought it would help them interact with local authorities and local people, enabling them to leverage their cultural ties and common values in fulfilling their mission. This strategy has worked well. Wardak Province Governor Halim Fedai says, "The Turkish programs are very sympathetic and acceptable to Afghans because they work within the Afghan culture and they are sensitive to Afghan values. We have a very good strong historical relationship with Turkey."<sup>7</sup>

The PRT in Wardak (a town 25 miles west of Kabul and one of the poorest provinces in Afghanistan) was established on 12 November 2006. This PRT cooperates with the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (similar to the U.S. Agency for International Development) and has completed over 200 projects with its 130 employees. Its stated goal is to focus on socio-cultural projects that can benefit the Afghan public in the fields of education, health, and infrastructure with a view to enhance their quality of life. This has included restoring and building schools, hospitals and mosques, conducting health checks for people who live far away from city centers, training Afghan women to become midwives or nurses, building a sports complex at Kabul University, training Afghan police and military forces, training judges, prosecutors and mayors, and building roads, bridges, and water wells. In addition to these activities, which are funded by the Turkish government, private Turkish entrepreneurs have invested over \$2 billion in Afghanistan since 2002 in various projects.



(AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici)

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, left, and his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul pose for cameras before their meeting in Ankara, Turkey, 12 December 2012.

Following its success in Wardak Province, Turkey established the Jawzjan PRT in Shibirgan (the provincial center of Jawzjan) on 21 July 2010. The Jawzjan PRT operates in Jawzjan and Sar-i Pul Provinces under Regional Command North.<sup>8</sup> Like the Wardak PRT, the director is a civilian coordinator assigned by the Turkish Foreign Ministry. This PRT also houses other civilian components, such as civilians from the Departments of the Interior, Education, Health, and Agriculture, representatives from the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency, a police special operations team, and a police training and advisory team.<sup>9</sup>

### Diplomatic Initiatives: Afghanistan-Turkey-Pakistan

Turkey has close ties with both the Afghan and Pakistani governments and has initiated a trilateral mechanism called the Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Summit. The purpose of this initiative is

to improve relations between the two countries, whose ties are strained due to Afghan belief that Pakistan supports the Taliban and that Pakistan's northwestern tribal regions are being used as a base for Taliban fighters seeking to overthrow the Afghan government.<sup>10</sup> The first summit, which brought the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan together in Turkey, was held in 2007. Since the start of this initiative, seven such summits have taken place (2007, 2008, 2009, twice in 2010, 2011, and 2012) at the presidential level.

Each year the focus of the meetings has been different, but they generally involve dialogue on economic cooperation, cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and cooperation in the intelligence, political and military fields, as well as security and training. After the 2009 summit Turkish Parliamentary Deputy Kayatürk noted that it was the first time that the military and intelligence chiefs of Afghanistan and Pakistan had come together. These trilateral summits may not solve decades-



long problems, but they serve to keep the lines of communication open. In this case, just keeping the talks moving can be critical, even if the meetings do not yield many concrete results.

The most important outcome came from the fifth trilateral summit, which took place in December 2010, when the three countries agreed to conduct joint military exercises. These took place in March 2011 and included demonstrations by the Turkish army and joint exercises in military operations in urban terrain (MOUT) against terrorists, basic and battle order training, MOUT demonstration by the Turkish Army, combat order, training control, and combating improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The exercises were conducted in Turkey and aimed at establishing close military ties among the countries.

After the sixth summit in November 2011, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari said that in solving the problems between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it was important for a country like Turkey, which knows the region and culture well, rather than far-away countries to take the lead: “Turkey is our friend, and a brother Muslim country. This is why I think it’s more appropriate for Turkey to support and guide us when we need it.”<sup>11</sup> The Afghan side shares this view. During the same month Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Rassoul Zalmi said, “Afghans are honored and blessed to have a friend like Turkey.”<sup>12</sup> Following this, in a visit to Turkey in December 2011, Afghan President Karzai expressed his preference for Turkey to host a liaison office for the Afghan Taliban to facilitate reconciliation. In reality, this was unlikely because of Turkey’s role in ISAF, and Qatar was ultimately chosen as the venue for a Taliban representative office.<sup>13</sup> However, it would not be surprising to see Turkey play some kind of reconciliatory role between the Taliban and the Afghan government, because Turkey views the Taliban as being different from Al-Qaida.

Pakistan welcomes these diplomatic initiatives by Turkey and views them as especially valuable due to Turkey’s membership in NATO. Such moves help Pakistanis trust Turkish support and sincerity. A 22 May 2012 article in the *Pakistan Observer*, a popular English-language daily newspaper published in Islamabad, summarized the Pakistani point of view. The article, “Turkey Supports Pakistan at Chicago Summit,” stated:

Turkish President Abdullah Gül at the NATO summit in Chicago . . . backed Pakistan’s position on crucial issues . . . Turkish endorsement of Pakistan’s positions is meaningful in that it is a member of NATO and its voice is being heard in the organization. The support of Turkey is very important as it comes at a time when others are unduly pressuring Pakistan on issues involving re-engagement with the United States and NATO . . . There is tremendous goodwill and determination on both sides to take their relations to new heights and we are sure this model relationship has the potential to benefit people of the two countries immensely.<sup>14</sup>

This relationship with Pakistan has likely prevented Turkish troops from being attacked by the Afghan Taliban, which are supported by Pakistan and who use Pakistani territory as a base of operations. Turkey has suffered very low casualties in Afghanistan, and these have been due to crashes and accidents and not to Taliban attacks.

There have been other diplomatic initiatives as well. Turkey initiated the “Istanbul for Afghanistan” summit (short for Istanbul Summit for Friendship and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia).<sup>15</sup> This initiative was launched in November 2011 and brings



**Turkish President Abdullah Gul, right, meets with U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in Ankara, Turkey, 16 December 2011.** (DOD, Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

together all the countries that border Afghanistan, with the goal of involving all those countries in finding sustainable solutions to Afghanistan's security and stability problems. The presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey, the first vice president of Iran, the special representative of the president and the minister of foreign affairs of China, and the minister of foreign affairs of Tajikistan met in Istanbul upon the invitation of Turkey. (Representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Russia, the Islamic Conference, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, the UN, EU, and NATO attended as observers.)

Aside from governmental initiatives, the Turkish private sector and business industry have also been cooperating with the Investment Support Agency of Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> The Turkish business community and chambers of commerce have agreed on a "Cooperation on Energy and Mineral Resources" between the two countries, signed in February 2011.<sup>17</sup> The memorandum of understanding calls for cooperation in energy and mineral resources, the first of its kind Afghanistan has signed with another country in the field of mining.

## **Capacity Development: Building Strong Indigenous Armed Forces**

Turkey has contributed to training local police and military forces in Afghanistan. Turkish personnel in Afghanistan have trained over 12,500 Afghan personnel; and another 3,300 have trained in Turkey. It is also leading a NATO training mission that plans to train 15,000 Afghan policemen over the course of a decade. On 1 March 2011 senior representatives from Afghanistan, Turkey, Japan, and the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan signed an agreement for the training of Afghan police officers at the Police

Officer Candidate School in Sivas, Turkey. In accordance with the agreement, the first round of 500 officers arrived in Turkey in July 2011. They received professional instruction during a six-month course given by Afghan and Turkish instructors. Upon graduation in February 2012, officers were assigned to units of the Afghan National Police throughout Afghanistan. The second round of 500 officers graduated in February 2013 after completing the six-month course covering 54 subjects, including theoretical and practical covering human rights, commandos, and crime scene investigation subjects, among others. Another round of Afghan policeman are expected to be traveling to Turkey in late 2013 for the training course.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, 300 senior cadets from the Afghan National Academy completed a one-month training in Izmir with the Turkish Army in September 2011. The ultimate goal was to build strong and indigenous armed forces such that the number of coalition combat forces in Afghanistan could be reduced. This is part of a broader effort to support plans to hand over security to Afghans in 2014 and reduce the role of coalition forces to logistics, intelligence, and medical and air transportation, instead of a combat role.

The Turkish police are also providing counternarcotics training to the Afghan police by hosting Afghan police at the Turkish Academy of International Narcotics and Fighting Organized Crime.<sup>19</sup> This institution is under the Police Department's organized crime office.<sup>20</sup> Another field of capacity development is specialized training for Afghan doctors in medical schools in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> On 10 December 2011 the Health Departments of the two countries agreed to have Afghan doctors, nurses and midwives, and other medical officials train in Turkish medical schools in programs ranging from three months to one year.

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## NATO Responsibility or Brotherhood Pledge?

On 16 March 2012 a Turkish military helicopter crashed into a home near Kabul, killing 12 Turkish soldiers on board and four Afghans on the ground. This was only the second time that Turkish forces suffered casualties (previously, in 2009, two Turkish soldiers, one of them a colonel, were killed in a traffic accident in northern Afghanistan). In general, the force has suffered relatively few casualties due to its noncombatant role. The helicopter crash caused a stir in Turkey about the necessity of Turkey's presence in Afghanistan as part of the NATO-led mission, claiming that the soldiers had lost their lives for "U.S. interests." Main opposition Republican Peoples' Party Deputy Bülent Tezcan submitted a petition to the Turkish parliament, demanding that the prime minister answer a series of questions about Turkey's mission in Afghanistan. Republican Peoples' Party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu questioned what Turkey was doing in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of another opposition party, the Nationalist Movement Party, said that the incident made it necessary to "reconsider our military presence there. . . Turkey's presence has no strategic importance anymore. In fact, our presence is starting to lead to lost lives. We need to start planning a road map to withdraw our troops there . . . Turkey should move to close its Afghanistan chapter."<sup>23</sup> The crash came shortly after the Qur'an burnings and the shooting incident that took place in Afghanistan, providing additional ammunition for those calling for Turkey to withdraw. Bahçeli said, "These incidents have brought to the surface some realities that we need to face. The U.S. soldiers' burning of our Holy Book the Qur'an at the Baghram air base, and then massacring 16 civil Afghans including women and children in Kandahar, has created a provocative environment there. The Prime Minister has turned a blind eye to these realities."<sup>24</sup> These comments are not only a way to attack the government, but also demonstrate a general reluctance in Turkey to be seen as bowing to U.S. interests.



(U.S. Army, Gertrud Zach)

U.S. soldiers with Hawk Company, 3d Squadron, 2d Cavalry Regiment (3-2 Cavalry) observe a Turkish Land Force soldier as he fires an MK19-3 40mm machine gun, 7 December 2011, Grafenwoehr, Germany.



In response to these criticisms, government leaders argued that Turkish troops had not lost their lives in Afghanistan for U.S. interests, but rather as part of a much more important mission that has a historical meaning for Turkey. Turkish Defense Minister İsmet Yılmaz said that the presence of Turkish troops in Afghanistan had nothing to do with NATO, arguing that “Afghanistan was [one of the] first countries to recognize Turkey during our founding, it was the first country to open an embassy in Ankara. We have a pact that goes back to the era of Atatürk, [Mustafa Kemal, the founder of Turkey]. Turkey will help when Afghanistan is in trouble, and Afghanistan will help when Turkey is in trouble. Our presence there has nothing to do with NATO.”<sup>25</sup>

## The Concept of Civilian PRTs after 2014

The concept of civilian PRTs has long been a topic of discussion, which has become more prevalent as 2014 approaches, when the process of transitioning the security responsibility to Afghan troops will end. Many European countries have already announced plans to end their missions; others are considering alternative strategies and policies that will stabilize Afghanistan after 2014. One of the options being discussed is transitioning the PRTs into purely civilian roles.

The success of the civilian PRTs in Wardak and Jawzjan, initiated by Turkey, may offer a model for part of the contingent of U.S. troops that will stay in Afghanistan after 2014 as advisors and trainers. That the Turkish civilian-run PRTs are winning Afghan hearts and minds points to the importance that the teams working with indigenous forces are familiar with, among other things, local languages and cultures. It also suggests the Muslim faith can be emphasized as a common denominator among the different groups in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> The main question is whether this is feasible without the support that military components of PRTs provide. Nevertheless, analyzing the advantages of the concept is useful.

Studies on the topic point out that civilian PRTs would potentially eliminate some of the problems that studies on military-led PRTs have identified. These include unclear coordination between military and civilian PRT efforts due to a lack of clear

lines of authority and chains of command, as well as confusion regarding the exact definition of PRTs, what their goals are and how their objectives relate to an overall political purpose. This has also led to differing ideas on how they should relate to non-governmental organization (NGO) humanitarian relief efforts.<sup>27</sup>

Civilian-led PRTs would reduce some of the tension inherent in joint military and civilian undertakings, and would assuage some of the mistrust that local populations feel toward foreign militaries. They would also dispel the problem of the relationship between PRTs and NGOs. According to a United States Institute of Peace report on U.S. experience with PRTs in Afghanistan, some NGOs have complained about members of PRTs engaged in reconstruction work (who wear the same uniforms as those who engage in military operations), arguing that this makes it hard for the local population to differentiate between NGO efforts and the efforts of those engaged in military operations. NGOs involved in relief work apparently want to be viewed as neutral, but worry that their safety is compromised if locals are not able to differentiate between foreign civilian and military actors.<sup>28</sup>

Currently it is not exactly clear what type of role U.S. forces will play after 2014 and whether the civilian-led PRT concept would be successful. One reason the Turkish civilian-run PRTs have been successful has been Turkey’s advantage over its Western allies due to its cultural, religious, and historical ties, and to its noncombat mission. To be sure, Turkey would not be able to do this without the security provided by the U.S. and the other main robust forces there, whose core goals in Afghanistan involve security and denying sanctuary to armed insurgent groups and terrorists, in addition to the development, capacity building and training on governance that they provide. This begs the question of whether civilian PRTs can sustain their efforts without the security umbrella that ISAF currently provides.

The same issue also raises the question of how and whether Turkey can sustain a presence there, even in a noncombat role. Despite all the comments about Turkey’s long-term commitments to Afghanistan, it is uncertain whether it can sustain its projects without this security umbrella. This will depend on how much the U.S. eventually commits to Afghanistan beyond 2014. **MR**

## NOTES

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